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1 message

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Commuters rejoice: New way across Fox River ready for traffic

By James Fuller Daily Herald

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[PHOTO] The first vehicles carrying dignitaries, politicians and workers cross the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin Wednesday. The bridge officially opened today.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] Batavia Mayor Jeff Schielke, left, and former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert talk during the ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin Wednesday.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez addresses the crowd Wednesday during the ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] Former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert shakes hands with well-wishers before Wednesday's ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin. Hastert was a key proponent of the bridge.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] Vehicles cross the Fox River during the ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin Wednesday.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] A homeowner who had to move because of the Stearns Road bridge construction project wipes away a tear after being recognized during a ceremony before the unofficial opening of the roadway Wednesday in South Elgin.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] The ribbon is cut marking the ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin Wednesday.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

[PHOTO] Kane County Board Chairman Karen McConnaughay speaks during a news conference preceding the ceremonial opening of the Stearns Road bridge in South Elgin Wednesday. The bridge will officially open to traffic on Thursday.

Rick West | Staff Photographer

For Kane and DuPage County commuters, the opening of the Stearns Road Bridge today marks a shorter drive for anyone needing to cross the Fox River.

For former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, cutting the ribbon on the bridge Wednesday marked another piece of his political legacy.

"When you measure your life in things that you've accomplished and things you've gotten done, this is a good thing to have done," said a nostalgic Hastert. "But I started this almost 25 years ago, which is almost a third of your life. I hope for generations to come that this is something people can enjoy, makes their life better, makes commerce better, makes living better and makes this community better."

Many thanks, handshakes, hugs and autographs were exchanged among Hastert and his fans Wednesday. Chief among them was Kane County Board Chairman Karen McConnaughay, who gave all the credit for both the vision and federal financing of the more than \$146 million bridge to Hastert.

McConnaughay recalled Hastert saying at the groundbreaking for the bridge in 2006 that the process of bringing the bridge to life was making him grow old.

"The aging process has now stopped, and (the bridge) is waiting for you and I and everyone else to cross it," McConnaughay said in recognition of her political mentor.

Both Hastert and McConnaughay recognized the bridge didn't come without some controversy. The river crossing is located in a relatively natural area and the process did force more than a dozen homeowners and businesses to relocate. Many of the former property owners participated in the opening ceremony Wednesday and applauded the opening of the bridge. McConnaughay said she is particularly proud of the attention paid to the natural environment surrounding the bridge as well as the biking and walking paths constructed along with the bridge.

"We are a shining example of our ability in this country to build infrastructure and at the same time protect the environment," McConnaughay said. She also gave the project her catchphrase stamp of approval of being "on time and under budget." She also used that same phrase at the opening of the county's new jail.

Joining McConnaughay and Hastert were a who's who of suburban mayors, construction union members and state, county and federal politicians who toured the new Stearns Road corridor by bus. The corridor is the largest infrastructure project in the history of Kane County. The 4.6-mile corridor and new Fox River bridge create an east-west commuter route connecting Route 59 on the east with Randall Road on the west. The bridge is expected to bring traffic congestion relief to all commuters needing to cross the river between Route 64 in St. Charles and State Street in South Elgin.

The project may also bring a new plethora of shoppers to the heart of South Elgin's commercial area. That was a fact not lost on Mayor Jim Hansen.

"It's a very big deal for South Elgin," Hansen said. "We can hardly wait."

The corridor is open for traffic Thursday [12/16].